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Opening address of the Director-General to the 349th Session of the Governing Body (Monday 30 October 2023)

Chairperson of the Governing Body, Ambassador Adejola; Employer Vice-Chairperson Ms Renate Hornung-Draus; Worker Vice-Chairperson, Ms Catelene Passchier; members of the Governing Body; ladies and gentlemen,

Like others, I welcome you to this 349th Session of the ILO Governing Body.

Allow me also to add my voice to those who have already spoken to welcome Celeste Drake, Deputy Director-General, Beate Andrees, Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia and Fanfan Rwanyindo Kayirangwa, Regional Director for Africa.

Since our last meeting in June during the International Labour Conference, unfortunately the number of crises and challenges we are facing has only increased.

The latest being the – I must say – tragic intensification of the conflict in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

To be completely honest, my heart bleeds.

My heart bleeds when faced with so much human suffering, and I would like to express my deepest compassion to all those affected by this conflict, directly or indirectly.

My heart bleeds when I see that the right to exist of all States in the region, within secure and internationally recognized borders, is still not a reality.

My heart bleeds when I see that, 75 years after its creation, the State of Israel still cannot live in sustainable peace with all its neighbours and in security.

My heart bleeds when I see that the Palestinian people are still not able to enjoy their legitimate and inalienable rights.

None of us should remain indifferent in the face of the brutal loss of so many civilian lives since 7 October.

We should – we absolutely must – join forces to put an end to this terrible human suffering.

Allow me to quote Nelson Mandela who, in his book *Long Walk to Freedom*, said:

No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.

In this context, the ILO is mandated to promote social justice, which alone can lay the foundation for a universal and sustainable peace. The ILO is a house of dialogue, and we can and should contribute to this universal peace.

The Office manages various programmes to promote decent work in the region. Through them, the Office seeks to create a basis for peaceful development which will benefit all the peoples in the region.

That includes the Occupied Palestinian Territory where the Office has been working since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 to promote the right to work, improve employment and extend social protection to all people. A new Decent Work Programme was agreed and signed with the constituents in February 2023.

In response to recent developments, we have reprogrammed our resources. We are currently channelling emergency aid to provide shelter and other relief to Gazan workers who are temporarily in the West Bank and are facing dire living conditions. In addition, we have prepared a three-stage emergency response programme covering social protection, skills, employment and business recovery, especially for SMEs.

We will do all we can to continue this important work.

We are also making every effort to ensure the safety and security of our staff in the region. Staff in the Jerusalem office are working from home, and we are in continuous contact with our colleague in Gaza who, with their family, has taken refuge on the premises of our colleagues at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

We also continue to stand in full solidarity with all those affected by the conflict in Ukraine.

The ILO is firmly committed to intensifying resource mobilization to ensure that we can respond fully to the needs of our Ukrainian constituents. We are accelerating our dialogue with the Government to set up the first ILO office in Ukraine, and the Regional Director was there just two weeks ago.

The ILO also continues to stand in solidarity with all other populations affected by conflicts around the world, and we are continuing our activities insofar as security conditions allow.

Against this tragic backdrop, we continue to face an extremely serious global employment situation. As we announced in early January, global employment growth in 2023 is expected to reach just 1.0 per cent, less than half the level reported in 2022.

In general, activity rates are not returning to pre-pandemic levels. Weak economic conditions are having an impact on people returning to the labour market. More and more workers are being forced to accept lower-quality jobs, poorly paid jobs, jobs lacking basic labour rights, job security and social protection. This is exacerbating the inequalities already heightened by the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis, including gender inequalities. Young people in particular continue to face major difficulties.

The situation is particularly serious in low-income countries, especially those that are also struggling with significant and unmanageable levels of debt.

But the landscape is not entirely bleak. The ILO also predicts that the total number of unemployed people in the world will fall by around 1 million in 2023. And the number of people living in extreme poverty while in employment has continued to fall since the peak of the COVID-19 crisis.

Overall, however, it is clear that much more vigorous action is needed to ensure decent work.

This brings me to the agenda before this session of the Governing Body.

Many of the items that we will discuss seek to respond to the gravity of this complex situation.

First, let me highlight our discussions on the Global Coalition for Social Justice.

At the Conference in June, we received feedback on the Coalition from all three groups. We are grateful for these inputs and have amended our proposals accordingly.

We have also conducted three substantive consultation sessions. We have sought to incorporate the outputs of these into the governance and priorities of the Global Coalition. The results are in the document you have before you for this session.

We look forward to receiving your further guidance on the Coalition.

This being said, let me emphasize that the need for the Coalition to start work is becoming increasingly urgent. There is so much to be done, and so much the Coalition can accomplish.

The Global Coalition will also help the Office prepare fully for the highly important United Nations Summits that are on the horizon, and which we will also be discussing later this week.

I am talking about the Summit of the Future that will be held in 2024, and the second World Social Summit that will take place in 2025 – if the General Assembly so agrees.

Last month, I attended the SDG Summit in New York. There, I had the opportunity to speak to world leaders about the need to strengthen public institutions and create policies that are integrated more effectively in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The Global Accelerator on Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions will be of particular importance.

I was also pleased to speak at the launch of the U.S.–Brazil Partnership for Workers' Rights, together with President Joe Biden of the United States of America and President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil.

And I took part in the Global Citizen Festival, which launched the ILO global campaign to raise awareness of the need to reduce inequalities in the world of work.

All these events enabled us to turn a public spotlight onto the priorities that this Governing Body has endorsed.

This session will also be following up on some of the key Conference discussions held in June.

This includes the technical committees, which adopted important conclusions on just transition and labour protection, and a Recommendation concerning quality apprenticeships.

We will be looking at how this Office can implement these recommendations, and how we can work with our constituents to raise the profile and priority of the issues concerned.

We will also discuss several country cases raised through the complaints mechanisms in the ILO Constitution.

Among them is Belarus. We will consider how to maximize the impact of the measures adopted by the Conference under article 33 of the ILO Constitution to improve respect for fundamental workers' rights in Belarus.

Another point of follow-up to the Conference that I would like to highlight relates to the Programme and Budget for 2024–25. The Office is now working intensively to prepare its implementation and I can assure you that we will be ready to do so from day one of the next biennium.

Finally, under my own report to the Governing Body I will be informing you of ratifications of the 1986 Instrument for the Amendment of the Constitution of the ILO. I am disappointed

to say that since we last looked at this matter, at the March session of the Governing Body, there have been no new ratifications of the Amendment.

Therefore, let me use this opportunity to reaffirm my commitment to working with you to ensure that the 1986 Amendment enters into force. As you know, for that to happen we need three more ratifications by ILO Members of chief industrial importance.

You will all be keenly aware that after we conclude our normal business, the Governing Body will move on to two extraordinary, dedicated and important discussions.

One, on 10 November, has been called to examine the request of the Workers' group and of some Governments for referral of the right to strike and related issues to the International Court of Justice, in line with article 37.1 of our Constitution.

The other, on 11 November, will consider the Employers' group's proposal, supported by one Government, to negotiate a protocol on the right to strike at the next session of the Conference.

I am looking forward to those discussions. I hope they may provide a way to resolve the uncertainties that have complicated, and at times halted, the work of our supervisory machinery. I know from my conversations with several of you that many of you share this hope.

As I said at the start of my intervention, this Governing Body session is being held at a time of alarming geopolitical tension and heartbreaking human suffering.

In times like these, the ability to move ahead on issues that are difficult and sensitive, but which can really improve the lives of ordinary people, is even more valuable, and necessary. This house, and the Governing Body, has a record of doing just that. Our Organization is known for its ability to achieve progress in the most difficult times.

I very much hope that the Governing Body will build on that unique record by making compromises and attaining consensus on the difficult issues we have before us on our agenda these weeks.

Thank you.